

“Who will pay for the concierge?”— ‘Place-making’ and its exclusion in Whitechapel Wenn Er Tan

Stepping out of Aldgate East station, one is immediately overwhelmed by the implosion of new towers on every corner; the briefest of London sun bouncing off the shiny metal and glass surfaces. It is here that we begin our fieldtrip— for the study of class cannot be contained in the classroom. Recognising that the spatial and the social are innately intertwined, we see class distinctions inscribed into the very architecture of a city.

In their recent publication *In Defense of Housing* (2016), Madden and Marcuse conceive of these gleaming skyscrapers as ‘global wealth congealed into tower form’ (2016: 15), underscoring the narrative of inequality that has come to characterise the London housing market.

‘Housing is under attack today. It is caught within a number of simultaneous social conflicts. Most immediately, there is a conflict between housing as lived, social space and housing as an instrument for profitmaking—a conflict between housing as home and as real estate.’ (Madden and Marcuse, 2016: 4)

They elucidate the situation one sees on the ground in Whitechapel, where construction on multi-million-dollar investment properties take place next to low-rise social housing complexes. The tension between perceiving housing as ‘homes’ or ‘investments’ is necessarily a classed one, raising questions of the types of people who are allowed into spaces. When developments are increasingly privatised, even ostensibly public spaces like open squares or pavements become contested spaces, drawing distinctions between individuals who are valued and (de)valued. We see this in the reports of ‘poor doors’, where social housing tenants and those who ‘pay for the concierge’ are subjected to different treatment within the same complex.

It is within this context that Goodman’s Fields is located. Sitting in the development’s main Piazza are six ‘bronze life and a quarter size horses’ (Mackie, 2016), meant to pay homage and reflect the area’s agricultural history as a farm.

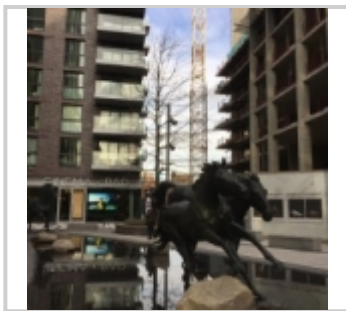
The artist’s website reflects the developers’ marketing material, suggesting that ‘Berkeley is all about place making. At Goodman’s fields we had the opportunity to create a landmark that celebrates British craftsmanship as well as the history of the local community’ (Mackie, 2016). The notion of capitalising

on an area’s past as the way forward has become a common one within the wider discourse of urban regeneration, and draws significant inspiration from the ‘creative cities’ model espoused by Florida (2002). Under this model of urban development, Florida privileges the ‘creative class’, a core group of workers in the knowledge economy that are perceived as being able to help bolster a city’s competitiveness on an international stage. Great pains are thus taken to attract these workers. We see this as far afield as the NDSM wharf in North Amsterdam, where regeneration efforts have drawn on the area’s industrial heritage as a ship dock. This is manifested in shipping container housing, and a literal crane hotel, making clear that the space no longer belongs to the original blue collar community but rather a new ‘creative class’. Returning to the site of Goodman’s Fields, we can understand the inclusion of renowned sculptures and an on-site cinema as attempts to attract a certain kind of resident, one that is socially mobile. Further, we can situate Goodman’s Fields in the broader discussions of gentrification of space— an on-going debate on how urban spaces are made and re-made to accommodate their publics. Woven into this narrative of regeneration is the idea of ‘place-making’, suggesting that developers are not merely building houses but rather homes and communities. Who then, constitutes these publics?

Looking forward, Whitechapel and its surrounds offers a mere glimpse into how the commodification of space has intensified in London, allowing society to rank individuals according to their wealth and social worth rather than as individuals with inherent value. When housing for the elite occupies a hulking spatial presence and alternative spaces are pushed into the city's nooks and crannies, we see the tangible manifestations of social distinctions. Ultimately, what is at stake isn't merely real estate, but the lived experiences that constitute urban life.

References

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